



Model
of rural healthcare research

DR KARL LE ROUX

Rural Institutional Award

Walter Sisulu University

To strengthen the capacity of the Zithulele Training and Research Centre in training rural healthcare workers and doing research that benefits rural medicine in South Africa and further afield.

Four close friends who graduated from the UCT medical campus within a year of each other, shared the ideal of building a more equal society. They've since bonded further to create one of the country's most innovative deep rural district hospitals.

Drs Ben and Taryn Gaunt and Drs Karl and Sally le Roux married before arriving at Zithulele Hospital in the Eastern Cape in 2005 and 2006 respectively. With a varied and complementary skill-set and open minds, they showed a willingness to get their hands dirty. The 146-bed hospital is snagged in a dusty web of rutted roads atop one of the rolling coastal hills near Coffee Bay, 99km from Mthatha. They immediately ran into the endemic challenges of many deep rural district hospitals, medicine and equipment shortages, low staff morale, a severe shortage of experience, lack of skills and supervision, and poor and scanty accommodation.

In the past almost 14 years, they have overcome nearly every obstacle, attracting and knitting together a large multi-disciplinary team of healthcare professionals, garnering several national awards. They've set up funding trusts, a local school, nutrition projects and a fast-expanding research and training centre to facilitate rural research and train healthcare workers. Neonatal mortality rates have plummeted, HIV and TB care is exemplary with incidence and death rates down, clinics run smoothly and some specific services, like eye-care, outstrip several regional Eastern Cape hospitals.

Zithulele Training and Research Centre

They're a shining example of how "stick-ability," attracts like-minded healthcare professionals, eager to contribute and learn. The Zithulele Training and Research Centre will now also boost the research capacity of this on-site rural facility and significantly upgrade its digital, technical and physical infrastructure. This takes their initiative of three years earlier to source three funding streams and custom-build a research and training facility, to the next level. With an upstairs training hall seating up to 120 people, a boardroom, two offices, kitchen and leisure space, it also sleeps 30 people downstairs. It's uniquely linked to the hospital's paediatric and maternity wards by an upper-level walkway.

The funding of laptops, overhead projectors and data capturers, cabling and networking, voice-recorders and cellphones, support-staff and sound-proof room dividers opens the door wider for visiting experts and trainers to conduct on-site seminars and workshops for local and surrounding hospital and clinic staff.

Ever-evolving and more focused on TB eradication

Karl le Roux is the Centre Manager who works on several research projects focusing on maternal and child health issues. "We're excited at the impact the centre's training, workshops and supervision will have on healthcare workers in the Eastern Cape," he says.

During a recent working visit to Princeton University, Karl and Sally met a TB expert and Professor of Global Health from Harvard, Professor Salmaan Keshavjee, a colleague of the world-renowned Dr Paul Farmer, the medical anthropologist, physician and author of the seminal, "In the Company of the Poor". "He described a more comprehensive approach to TB than we have in South Africa and different ways of treating and preventing TB, including latent TB infection. We'd like to use our centre as a base for an ambitious rural TB eradication programme, which we can then document to benefit rural areas in South Africa and other parts of the developing world. We're trying to get researchers out from Harvard, UCT, Stellenbosch and the Medical Research Council to put together a rigorous research protocol, using a health-systems approach so we can get on top of TB in our area, and ultimately our country," he enthuses.

The Zithulele clinical team has nurtured excellent ongoing relationships with all the aforementioned institutions. With the centre's new training and global digital connection capacity, it will provide an ideal base.

Measured, practical steps

Tactically, the team took the exact right initial steps, addressing the constriction of life-blood in any deep rural hospital, financial support and accommodation. Their umbrella Jabulani Rural Health Foundation is a broad-based NGO that, besides supporting the hospital, now provides pre-school education, pays translators and builds and manages accommodation.

Both couples have raised children on site, the eldest now teenagers, Sally has also diversified. "She initially divided her time between home-schooling our kids and her paediatric HIV clinics. We saw a whole bunch of local kids attending schools that weren't equipping them for life. Some NGOs set up a school and tried to source teachers, but nobody applied. So Sally volunteered in 2016, and is now the 'headmistress' and studying to become a qualified teacher through a distance learning course," he says.

The Zithulele Independent School teaches 48 kids from Grade R through to Grade 4, and Sally still puts in four hours of HIV paediatric work each week at the hospital.

Karl's magic wand would be waved at allowing proven reliable rural hospitals to manage their own affairs so that procurement and supply-chain management is enhanced.

The original clinical quartet came to Zithulele out of a sense of calling to work in rural medicine. That's sustained them through the darkest times.



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